

Islam and Social Responsibility

Dr. T. B. Irving

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One of the serious facts of this present age is that the accepted norms of behaviour have failed to convince and hold our youth, and we are facing a new time of ignorance, a fresh *Jāhiliyyah*, as the Arabs or Muslims would call it. Whether this is because Western values are basically false or because we fail to communicate them properly, the fact remains that we are facing a real crisis throughout the Western world.

This process is the opposite of the great eighteenth century movement which was called the Enlightenment, when Western Europe and North America seemed to be shaking off their age-old prejudices. For Muslims, it also forms a contrast to the startling period when the Prophet Muḥammad led the peoples of his arid peninsula out of chaos, both political and social, into the leadership of the then known world. In fact, Islam, during its earliest youth, spread over and conquered most of the countries at that time occupied by the decadent remains of the Roman civilization, bringing a new social order for millions of people.

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THE ISLAMIC ERA

The Prophet Muḥammad (may God accept his prayers and grant him peace!) established his religion, and then his state or commonwealth developed slowly, almost imperceptibly, during the decade from the year 622 C.E. or the *Hijrah* as it is called, the first year in the Islamic calendar, until his death in 632 C.E., only ten years later. By that time, instead of being a peninsula of mutually raiding tribes, Arabia had become a commonwealth which raised new standards for the world to adopt. All this occurred within the ten years after the *Hijrah* or "transfer" of the Prophet and his Muslim community from trying circumstances in Makkah to its new capital of Yathrib, or Madīnah as this city came to be called, two hundred and sixty miles to the north in an oasis on the ancient caravan route to Syria.

The life of the Prophet thus lasted from around the year 571 of the Christian era, when he was born, until 632. He was called *an-Nabī al-Ummī* or "the Unlettered Prophet" in the Qur'ān (7: 157-158). What does this term mean? It means simply that Muḥammad (may God accept his prayers and grant him peace) was not college trained as we might expect him to be today; nevertheless he led his people formally and sincerely to a better way of life. He was a most cultured and concerned individual yet he had never been to school, only trained to speak good Arabic by being brought up as an infant out on the desert, where they spoke the best Arabic in that day.

Almost immediately following his death, Islam burst upon the Near East and Europe, taking over the whole Sassanid empire of Persia and the southern tier of the Byzantine empire as far west as Spain and Morocco on the Atlantic. This conquest covered less than one century; by the year 711 C.E. only eighty years after the Prophet's death, Muslims were on the borders of France and were entering India to the east. Islam was termed the "middle nation" (The Qur'ān 2: 143), the community which was to practise moderation in all matters, an aim which Greek and other civilized societies had also had.

BASIC PURPOSE

The Muslim's basic purpose in life is to worship God in His Oneness, *bi-at-Tawḥīd* and not through the trinity of the Christians, nor the duality and idolatry of other religions. The Muslim works through the power of God's transcendence; in the words of King Arthur, the Celtic leader, admonishing his Knights of the Round Table:

"For what are men better than sheep or goats,
That nourish a blind life within the brain,
If, knowing God, they lift not hands in prayer
Both for themselves and those that call them friend?"
(Tennyson, *Morte d'Arthur*)

God is Transcendent (*al-Ghanī*, the Rich), as the Qur'ān teaches us, while mere man is only 'rich' or 'wealthy' when this same adjective is applied to him. Divine service or worship means giving 'worth' or value to what we respect and revere. We Muslims know God; we meet Him five times a day at least, while we are on our knees before Him.

Today our New World Toledo is helping to lift the dead hand which opposed these concepts, and to spread the universal message of Islam. If we are all willing to listen, then we may clear up some of the misunderstanding which has hindered Western appreciation of Middle Eastern ethics and values, especially since Islam itself has growing centres in the cities of North America, Great Britain and continental Europe.

THE SPIRIT OF ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION

"Read!", our Prophet was commanded at the beginning of Chapter 96 (*al-'Alaq*, The Clot) thus setting early a standard for Islamic society. Islam demanded from its very inception a fully literate tradition. Human records must be preserved if civilization is to function satisfactorily. We call this need statistics, which form the basis for economics and sociology, and especially for taxation and planning. Our great pre-

occupation as Muslims has thus always been with the matter or substance of civilized living, so that we have a firm basis on which to attain both spiritual and intellectual values, and thereby function usefully within our society.

What is civilization? At first Islam seemed to have started in a cultural backwater, almost a vacuum; but immediately, within the first decade of the Prophet's passing, it became a focus for cultural energy within the civilized world.

The Islamic way of viewing these values or standards is unique. In the first place, it is based upon a clear vision of the world and the Deity which is Responsible for its creation and existence.

The Arabic word for 'religion' is *Dīn*, which means something we 'owe' to God, much like the Latin concept of *religio* meaning something 'binding (us) back' to God. Similarly the word for 'standard' is *furqān* which gives the title to Chapter 25 (*al-Furqān*) in the Qur'ān. Our three capital or mortal sins are designed to ensure the pure worship of God Alone; these are:

- (1) *Kufr*, which means 'disbelief' as well as 'ingratitude'; while a *kāfir*, which is the present participle of the same root, is the ungrateful pagan or atheist who refuses to concede that God has any role within His creation;
- (2) *Shirk*, or 'association', which means giving God a partner of any sort, so that we no longer trust in Him Alone. Christian translators of the Qur'ān often call this 'polytheism' or 'idolatry', hoping thereby to divert criticism from themselves, although the trinity can be considered a variation on this theme, as can the dualism of the ancient Persians, and the cruder forms of paganism.
- (3) *Tughyān* or 'arrogation', which is the sin of refusing to trust in God implicitly, and acting in a tyrannous or bullying manner. When water, for instance, is arrogant, it overflows and floods us out, as happened in the time of Noah.

(The Qur'ān 69: 11)

The Muslim's belief in these concepts must be reinforced with practice, with the liturgy or ritual that develops with any religion. In Islam we call this underpinning of our faith the Five Pillars, which are: 1. Our belief or Creed; 2. Prayer (*ṣalāh*), which sustains daily life; 3. Fasting (*ṣawm*); 4. The Welfare Due (*zakāh*) which redistributes wealth within society; and finally 5. The Pilgrimage to Makkah (*Hajj*) when we have the means to do so, without leaving our families in want. These practices are summed up in the great hymn to Light in the chapter of that same name (24 *An-Nūr*); note the eloquence of the Qur'ān which has convinced millions of Muslims through fourteen glorious centuries:

God is the Light of Heaven and Earth!
His light may be compared to a niche
in which there is a lamp; the lamp
is in a glass; the glass
is as it were a glittering star
kindled from a blessed olive tree
[which is] neither Eastern nor Western,
whose oil will almost glow though fire
has never touched it. Light upon light,
God guides anyone He wishes to His light.
God composes parables for mankind;
God is Aware of everything!

There are houses God has permitted to be built
where His Name is mentioned; in them
He is glorified morning and evening
by men whom neither business nor trading
distract from remembering God,
keeping up prayer, and paying the welfare due.
They fear a day when their hearts and eyesight
will feel upset unless God rewards them
for the finest things they may have done,
and gives them even more out of His bounty.
God provides for anyone He wishes
without any reckoning!

Those who disbelieve [will find] their deeds
are like a mirage on a desert waste:
the thirsty man will reckon it is water
till, as he comes up to it,
he finds it is nothing.
Yet he finds God [stands] beside him
and he must render Him his account;
God is Prompt in reckoning!

Or like darkness on the unfathomed sea:
one wave covers up another wave
over which [hang] clouds;
layers of darkness, one above the other!
When he stretches out his hand,
he can scarcely see it. Anyone
to whom God does not grant light
will have no light!

(The Qur'ān 24: 35-40)

Thus Islam sets up its value system plainly concerning our necessity to think clearly about the Deity, and to worship Him sincerely. Only after we accomplish this, and establish His pure worship, do we consider the other sins or crimes which might be committed against society or our fellow men, such as murder, theft, lying, slander, adultery, etc. Of the big sins, three comprising Disbelief, Association and Arrogation are much the more serious, since they strike directly at basic belief and one's clear vision of God Alone.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Thus we are faced with social responsibility. Everyone has obligations to his own family, and we also have them towards society. Individual responsibility here becomes clear, since the commanding presence of God Alone makes each one of us acutely aware of his duty throughout the world. The welfare due redistributes wealth among the poor and needy so that society can function in a just manner. Muḥammad (may God accept his prayers and grant him peace) was an orphan, and so he knew from his childhood how necessary some form of public charity was, and is. Parenthood is a

serious obligation and must be assumed in a responsible manner too. Sections on moral behaviour are traced out in like manner. Good manners in both private and public are likewise considered to be important. However no duty is overwhelming:

“God only assigns a soul something it can cope with; it is credited with whatever it has earned, while it is debited with whatever it has brought upon itself”.

(The Qur'ān 2: 286)

What one might call our Major Commandments or our responsibilities are well set forth:

SAY: “Come close, I will recite what your Lord has forbidden you:

- (I) Do not associate anything with Him.
- (II) And [show] kindness towards both [your] parents.
- (III) Do not kill your children because of poverty; We shall provide for you as well as for them.
- (IV) Do not indulge in shocking acts which you may practise either openly or keep secret.
- (V) Do not kill any person whom God has forbidden except through [due process of] law. He has instructed you in this so that you may use your reason.
- (VI) Do not approach an orphan's estate before he comes of age except to improve it.
- (VII) Give full measure and weight in all fairness. We do not assign any person to do more than he can cope with.
- (VIII) Whenever you speak, be just even though it concerns a close relative.
- (IX) Fulfil God's covenant. Thus has He instructed you so that you may bear it in mind.
- (X) This is My Straight Road, so follow it and do not follow [other] paths which will separate you from His path, Thus has He instructed you so that you may do your duty.”

(The Qur'ān 6: 151-153)

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Economic life must likewise be taken care of in an ethical fashion, especially matters like usury or taking interest, which has always led to abuse. The law and the state must thus be able to function on a basis of justice for everyone. The ancient nation of Thamūd was warned that even a thirsty camel has its drinking rights (The Qur'ān 54: 23-30). Each nation is responsible for what it does (The Qur'ān 2: 134); the matter of collective responsibility is stated in the verse: "God does not change what any people have until they change what is in themselves" (The Qur'ān 8: 53); 13: 11). The principle of collective defence has been bewildering to those people who have attacked an Islamic community; Islam does not preach the idealistic doctrine of turning the Other Cheek, but instead prefers self-defence tempered with compassion and an attempt at reconciliation, as we learn in the following passage.

Who is finer in speech than someone who appeals to God, acts honourably and says: "I am a Muslim!"?

A good deed and an evil deed are not alike; repay [evil] with something that is finer, and see how someone who is separated from you by enmity will become a bosom friend!

Yet only those who discipline themselves will attain it; only the most fortunate will achieve it!

Nevertheless if some impulse from Satan should prompt you, seek refuge with God; He is the Alert, Aware!

(The Qur'ān 41: 33-36)

On an individual level, responsible action is encouraged; positive behaviour is preferred to negative or destructive conduct; we are promised: "Anyone who comes with a fine deed will have ten more like it, while anyone who comes with an evil deed will only be rewarded with its like: they will not be treated unjustly".

(The Qur'ān 6: 161)

Thus we are encouraged to be constructive in our conduct: with our close relatives first of all, with women, children and especially orphans, and with the poor and feeble-minded, and the wayfarer, all of whom need our care and compassion. The hospitality of Muslim countries has become proverbial:

They offer food to the needy, the orphan and the captive out of love for Him saying: "We are feeding you only for God's sake. We want no reward from you nor any thanks".

(The Qur'ān 76: 8-9)

Much of this attitude was worked out in detail by following the example of Prophetic practice or *Sunnah* as it is called in Arabic. The science of *Hadīth* or Traditions was established for this purpose, and its rigorous application is one of the glories of historical method which was painstakingly developed by Muslim scholars aiming at ascertaining the truth of past events and statements. Through all of this, the personality of the Prophet can be seen working with the intense sincerity which forms the basis for our *Hadīth* or Islamic traditions.

Ours is a proud tradition which has bound together the middle belt of countries that stretch from Morocco through Africa and southern Asia into Indonesia into a cultural whole. Despite the inroads of the West, the Islamic world is once more arising to assert itself as the "Middle Community" in the present world. Its ethics and its expression in art and society have given it a dignity which even the French were unable to destroy in North Africa, although the Spanish did this in Granada and Valencia. Here, however, is the message which the religion of Islam brings to the present century as the Western world gropes for its values, and seeks once more for what man should worship or give worth to. Islam steps forward with clear values to guide us to renewed social responsibility.

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